

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Feb 15th 2014

As we catch up with Jesus in today's gospel, we are among a crowd of thousands who have been following him for three days. The journey has lasted long enough to land the group in a "deserted place." It is at this point that Jesus' heart is moved with pity for the people. Like any dedicated leader, he understands the needs of his followers. Jesus is concerned about satisfying their hunger (in more ways than one!). The answer to this conundrum lies in the pockets of the disciples.

I had the privilege of spending two years as a volunteer in Micronesia on the island of Weno in Chuuk. The New York province Jesuits ran Xavier High School - a boarding school for young women and men from across that part of the Pacific. The Chuukese are an infectiously joyful group of people. Every time I found myself walking the dirt roads to my host family's home in the nearby village I was serenaded by voices coming from the homes along the way. "Sa mongo!" they would call out to me. "Come, let's eat!" Out of their scarcity came an abundant spirit of generosity.

My heart aches for the disciples when they ask, "Where can anyone get enough bread to satisfy them here in this deserted place?" while their pockets bulge with bread and fish. Jesus, like his Chuukese sisters and brothers, saw a way to meet the needs of others - by sharing what they had between them.

Perhaps I am troubled by the disciples because I see a similar scenario playing out in our world today. We talk with lowered voices over our bountiful meals about the tragedy of world hunger. We wish there was some way people could get access to appropriate health care while medications expire in our cabinets. We use our God-given talents for our own benefit rather than that of the common good.

The beauty of today's gospel is in Jesus' ability to challenge the disciples by calling them to serve. Jesus not only takes what food the disciples have, but he orders them to re-distribute it to the community. Through this experience of true service and re-distribution of resources, an abundant banquet is had in that deserted place.

I feel Jesus looking at my bank account, my cupboards, my gifts and ordering me to re-distribute what I have with those who are, as the gospel says, close to collapsing. We all have the ability to reach into our pockets, open our eyes to those passing by, and call out "come, let's eat!"

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